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ABSTRACT

Solano Community College (SCC) undertook its first effort to link college composition to content area classes in 1989-90, without team teaching. All students in a particular composition class were also enrolled in a designated biology or history section. This "scotch-taping" of classes resulted in several drawbacks. Instructors spent large amounts of time trying to update one another on what had been said in the two separate classes. Each instructor separately discussed with the students the relevance of the two fields to each other, but connections were delayed in the minds of students. Finally, the burden of discussing the links between reading/writing and the content area fell heavily on the English instructors. SCC attempted to overcome these difficulties through team teaching. The presence of both instructors in the room allowed for immediate answers to questions relating to either discipline or to the links between the fields. Faculty experience and student evaluations and performance suggested the following conclusions regarding the linked classes: (1) students taking the linked classes expressed an understanding of the relevance of reading and writing to learning in other fields; (2) the link allowed students to read primary materials in the content area, which in turn helped students relate personally to what they were learning; (3) teachers needed extra time to teach these classes effectively; (4) faculty development and rejuvenation were a by-product of the classes; (5) students were more reluctant to drop linked classes than they were to drop ordinary class sections; and (6) counselors played a key role in the success of the classes. (JMC)

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Team Teaching of English Linked to Basic Content Area Courses at Solano Community College

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This paper is the basis of a presentation given at the:
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Introduction

At Solano Community College (SCC), faculty have, for the past few years, been linking college composition (English 1) with introductory classes in other disciplines. We have taught English 1 with American History, Introduction to Biology, and Child Development. Plans are in the works for links of English 1 to courses in: Cultural Anthropology, The Legal Environment of Business, Introduction to Psychology, and American Government. Instructors for courses in Math Ideas, Nutrition, and Art have all expressed interest in linking with English.

The idea of linking English composition with so-called "content area" classes (classes that emphasize mastery of factual content, like history, rather than classes that emphasize mastery of a process, like composition) arises from concerns expressed by instructors in several disciplines at Solano Community College. English teachers express frustration that composition students often perceive reading and writing assignments as exercises without relevance to other course work or tasks outside school. Teachers in other fields complain that students who have had freshman English seem unable to write coherently or read textbooks independently. The lessons of English composition often seem to remain in the English classroom without application to students' lives and other studies.

Two established solutions to the problem of such compartmentalization of knowledge are: Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Interdisciplinary Studies (see appendix for definitions). The literature of these fields is full of documentation of the problem. We try to combine the best of both approaches in our linked classes (Wiley & Robinson 1987; Barth 1985; Luvaas-Briggs 1984).

Possible causes of "compartmentalization"

What causes students to compartmentalize knowledge, particularly reading and writing skills?

The organization of colleges into separate disciplines contributes to students' segregation of knowledge. Content area teachers feel there is barely enough time to cover the required concepts of biology and mathematics in a semester or quarter; they do not feel they have sufficient time to work with students on writing problems. In addition, though they may have participated in WAC projects, they often do not feel they have sufficient expertise to address any reading or writing problems that are not clear-cut.

What have others have done? Some solutions and their pros and cons

Colleges have tried to help students link reading/writing skills to content area work in a variety of ways. WAC programs help content area teachers incorporate reading and writing assignments in their classes, and there is evidence that these reading and writing activities improve students' comprehension and retention of information (Hughes-Wiener and Martin 1989). However, as SCC instructors testify, a content instructor's ability to help with reading and writing tasks is limited. Solano has had a WAC program (centered in the Writing Lab), but once funding stopped for the English teacher "consultant" to content area teachers, the program slowed down. (The lab has also become too busy to handle WAC assignments).

Some colleges help students transfer writing skills to other fields through "generic" English classes like "Writing for the Social Sciences." These classes are valuable, but it is hard for a writing teacher to know enough about other disciplines to judge the content of a paper written for them (Dobler 1988).

The linked class solution: our first attempt

We first tried linking college composition (English 1) to content area classes in 1989-90, without team teaching. All students in a particular composition class enrolled in a designated biology or history section (Barth 1985 describes a similar set-up). We now call this the "scotch-tape" model; we found that the two classes remained essentially separate despite being "scotch-taped" together.

Barth describes a "social" benefit that we also found in linked classes; students developed close bonds from sharing two classes; they worked together and supported each other much than students in other classes. (Recent work on "learning communities," in which entering students are tracked together into team-taught classes, supports this idea and suggests that students' retention

rates are higher in such "community" situations (Smith 1991, Hill 1985). Learning communities are well-established at colleges in Washington state; numerous schools in California, including Napa Valley College and College of the Sequoias are experimenting with learning communities).

Another discovery in our two pilot linked classes was that students wrote well and produced substantive content for two readers: a content area expert to whom they wanted to demonstrate in-depth knowledge, and a writing expert inexperienced in the content area, for whom they wanted to write clearly and explain concepts fully. Students could not count on the content instructor "reading between the lines" of unclear writing to figure out what they meant. English teachers benefited from papers with substantial content rather than content gathered halfheartedly for the "exercise" of writing an English paper. In other words, the content area class offered students a context for their reading and writing.

Problems with linked (but not team-taught) classes

We discovered some drawbacks to "scotch-taping": first, instructors spent large amounts of time trying to update each other on what had been said in the two separate classes. Second, each instructor separately discussed with the students the relevance of the two fields (e.g., English and biology) to each other, but connections were at best delayed in students' eyes; a question arising in English class about the biological content of an essay had to be put off until the next meeting of the biology class, and the student who asked the question had to maintain enthusiasm and responsibility to ask it again another day. Third, our content area teachers preferred to lecture, so the burden of discussing the links between reading/writing and the content area fell heavily on English instructors. We also observed during our first semester of "scotch-taped" classes that, when we did manage to appear in each other's classes, usually for the purpose of jointly explaining a paper assignment, students' writing was invariably more substantive and clear than for assignments given by only one of the teachers.

Rationale for linked, team-taught classes

We felt we could capitalize on the advantages of "scotch-taped" classes and solve problems of communication and continuity by team-teaching. The presence of both instructors in the classroom allows immediate answers to questions relating to either discipline or to the links between the fields. Having both instructors present allows students to see a connection between disciplines rather than being told about it. In addition, team-taught classes magnify the "community" effect that we had already observed in our first linked classes. Students can form relationships with each other and with a

pair of teachers; students can see a "team" on their side. Underprepared students, in particular, can benefit from two concerned teachers whose teamwork often brings problems to light faster than they might surface in an ordinary class and whose two heads are often better than one for brainstorming solutions to problems.

Logistics of team-taught linked classes

We schedule linked classes back to back (e.g. English 1 MWF 9-10, Intro. to Biology MWF 10-11) in the same room. Both instructors are present for both hours, so in reality they have a block of instructional time to use however they wish. (Each instructor receives a full class of reassigned time in his/her teaching schedule to allow for the double teaching time). Classes are limited to the size of a regular English 1 class, which is 30 students at SCC. All students are required to take both classes and cannot drop one without dropping the other. Both teachers grade all or nearly all papers. Students receive grades and full credit for both classes.

Support for the classes

At SCC, college faculty development mini-grants supported planning of our first two linked classes (English 1 with American History and with Introduction to Biology) two years ago. This year a state Chancellor's Office grant is supporting the planning of a third linked class, English 1 with Human Development, and the experimental team-teaching of all three classes.

In addition, a state research grant allowed us to try to evaluate improvements in the reading, writing, and comprehension skills of students in one linked class compared to skills of students in "unlinked" sections of the same content area class. Students in the Fall 1991 linked English 1 and American History classes along with students in "unlinked" American History sections read identical material and wrote essays on identical topics at the beginning and end of the semester. Both were scored holistically by instructors from history and English. We would like to expand this research, following Linda Luvaas-Briggs' work at Sacramento City College, where she determined that students from a linked, team-taught Reading/Writing/Content Area class configuration attempted more units in subsequent semesters, had higher GPA's, and showed better retention rates than a control group. Evidence of such long-term gains for students (and the resulting financial benefits to the college) will help us get long-term support for our program from a cost-conscious administration and governing board. The results of our research were presented in a report by Susan Messina and Diane White at the College Reading and Learning Association conference in April, 1992. Among other things, their report suggests that students who have had no English or only

pre-college level English when they attempt a college-level content class will do very poorly in the content class.

Some lessons of our experience so far

Faculty experience as well as student evaluations and performance in the linked classes we have taught so far suggest the following conclusions:

1. Students who take these classes do express, at the end of the term, an understanding of the relevance of reading and writing to learning in other fields. Student evaluations included comments on the value of using reading strategies like mapping for classes other than the content class to which English was linked. Students also expressed the idea that using English as a tool for learning the content area material was valuable. A number of students commented that they felt they were weak in one of the two areas (e.g., I'm good at English but not so hot at biology and so the English helped me stay motivated to study biology).

2. The link allowed students to read primary materials in the content area -- e.g. history monographs, writing on conservation by Aldo Leopold -- rather than relying solely on a text.

3. The reading of primary materials in some cases helped students relate personally to what they were learning. One student, for example, commented that she would read her biology text and not fully understand a concept until she read the assigned essays for English, which would then "bring [the concept] home" for her. Primary texts, chosen carefully, can help "dry facts" become "real" for students. This ability to connect the global to the personal seems essential at a time when, for just one example, the ozone layer, on which all earthly life depends, is threatened as the result of human action (and inaction). Students, need to feel a personal relationship to global problems in order to be motivated to help solve them.

4. Teachers need time to continue to teach classes like these. The idea that reassigned time can be offered for team-teaching or coordination on a temporary basis, "until the project gets off the ground," does not take into account the continuing preparation and the demands of team teaching. Although it's true that faculty teaching together for the second or third time had a better understanding of each other's goals and methods, each still needed to prepare both her own materials and her teaching partner's in order to be able to help students make fresh connections. Just as an English teacher rereads *Jane Eyre* each time s/he teaches it, so s/he can have all its nuances fresh in her mind, so the English teacher must reread his/her teaching partner's biology or history or child development assignments. Also, we

have found that both teachers need to read all papers, which means the content area teacher has a much heavier paper-grading load than normal.

5. Faculty development and rejuvenation are a wonderful byproduct of the classes. As faculty work together and learn from each other, respect and collegiality follow. One interesting change in teaching style has occurred with the content teachers involved in the project, who have, as a result of the linked classes, tended to decrease time spent lecturing in favor of more group and discussion-oriented activities.

6. Students seem more reluctant to drop linked classes than they are to drop ordinary sections of English 1 or other classes. This has even been true for students who are clearly doing very poorly in one of the two classes. The reasons may be that dropping one means dropping the other where they might still succeed, and dropping both means losing a large number of units.

7. The counselors are key players in the success of these classes. The classes' success depends in part on students being interested in linking English to the content area under consideration. At SCC, counselors are the primary contacts students have when planning schedules as we have no faculty advising program. So we feel we need to enlist counselors in directing to the classes students who might be interested (e.g., those who say they hope to go to medical school might find English 1 with Biology interesting) and in helping students understand the demands of interdisciplinary study (e.g., falling behind on work in one class will affect work in the other as well).

Do we believe these classes work to help students apply reading and writing skills for learning in other fields, and to help students form a sense of community (often missing on the commuter campuses of community colleges? Yes. Do we think linked classes are the right option for every student? No. Do we have definitive proof of our impressions? No. More research remains to be done, and we hope to do some of it at Solano.

Appendix

In Writing Across the Curriculum programs, English instructors help instructors in other disciplines integrate writing in their classes and learn to evaluate it.

In Interdisciplinary Studies programs, courses from different disciplines are linked and often team taught.

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